

LEON FORREST

(1937–)

Dana A. Williams

BIOGRAPHY

Born January 8, 1937, Leon Forrest grew up on the South Side of Chicago. He attended Wendell Phillips Elementary School, and in 1951 he was one of the few African American students who attended Hyde Park High School. After completing high school in 1955, Forrest attended Wilson Junior College for a year, Roosevelt University for a year, and, finally, the University of Chicago. Forrest's interest in writing emerged during his grade school years, and his formal work as a journalist began in 1960, when he became a public information specialist while touring Germany in the U.S. Army. Upon his return to Chicago, from 1964 to 1968, he worked for the *Bulletin Booster* newspapers, community weeklies on Chicago's South Side. In 1969, Forrest became an associate editor for *Muhammed Speaks*, a position he held until the publication of his first novel.

In the early 1970s, Forrest met Ralph Ellison,* whose support of the young novelist is detailed in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. Forrest also met Toni Morrison,* who was, then, an editor at Random House in search of new African American writers. Under Morrison's editorship, Forrest published his first two novels and established himself as a prodigious novelist. In 1985–1994, he served as chair of African American studies at Northwestern, where he was also a professor of English. Currently, he is working on another novel structured as a series of novellas.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Forrest's works are best understood when read as his attempts to transform the expressive modes of presentation of African American life and history, from

everyday occurrences to life-explaining and life-sustaining events and achievements. His success as a major novelist rests in his ability to reinvent narrative strategy by employing African American vernacular traditions such as spirituals, folk speech, the blues, sermonic texts that observe conventions of oral language, repetition, and orality. In each of his novels, cultural themes and themes of religion, of flight, and of family are foregrounded and presented with substantial genre modifications. The action of each novel is presented using multiple narrative conventions, including the eulogy, the folk sermon, epistles, poetic monologues, and stream-of-consciousness-relayed surreal episodes. Collectively used and in conjunction with the classical and mythical allusions that frequent his works, these intertextual narrative conventions require astute readings for full comprehension. Like Ellison and Morrison, both of whom draw heavily from folklore and myth, Forrest expects his readers to bring to his texts culturally specific knowledge of the past to recognize and to understand his reinvented and transformed allusions.

In his first novel, *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden* (1973), Forrest presents the life of Nathaniel Witherspoon, who reappears in his later novels *The Bloodworth Orphans* and *Two Wings to Veil My Face*. Experiencing the agony of a motherless child, Nathaniel is the editor of his life and his family's history. His attempts to process fragments of biographical, sociological, and emotional information about his relatives, his ancestors, historical figures, and, finally, himself in order to cope with his mother's death serve as the nonconventional plot of the novel. Because his mother's death also involves a break in his link to his ancestral history, he must find a way to establish his own link to his history and to the past. Highly symbolic of the rootlessness experienced by an enslaved people removed from their native land and culture, Nathan experiences a sense of loss that can be rectified only by recovering the past.

As he sits in the back of a Cadillac with Aunty Breedlove en route to his mother's funeral, Nathan, through the process of (re)memory, explores the inner conflicts that have denied his sense of wholeness. In "The Lives," he begins to sort out the list of characters who have some bearing on his life. These biographical sketches include his family members as well as historical figures such as Louis Armstrong, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Abraham Lincoln, each of whom is culturally and personally significant to Nathan. In "The Nightmare" and "The Dream," Forrest reinforces the themes introduced in the first section, especially the motherless child motif, as Nathan attempts to resolve his inner conflicts. The central action in "The Vision," a crucifixion/lynching/dismemberment ritual, revolves around Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," which details the lynching of black men. In "Wakefulness," Nathan has achieved some sense of wholeness as he is persuaded to emerge from underneath the bed where he has been hiding in the midst of his confusion. Though he appears to have achieved some sense of self-identity, his journey toward reconciliation of the past and the present and their effect on the future continues. In the 1988 edition of the text, Forrest appended a section entitled "Transformation" in the form of an

“Epistle of Sweetie Reed.” It is a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson, dated May 7, 1967 and intended to warn the president of the world evils to come, including the election of Nixon and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. In relation to the original sections, “Transformation” contrasts Nathan’s rootlessness to Sweetie Reed’s wisdom. As the 100-year-old Sweetie Reed is still alive at the novel’s close, Nathan has found his link to the past, in all her wisdom, and, in turn, his hope for a better future.

Forrest’s second novel, *The Bloodworth Orphans* (1977), continues the saga of the Witherspoon family. The novel opens in the early 1970s, when Forest County (Forrest’s fictional county) has begun an era of civil unrest that is filled with violence and rioting in its inner city. Nathaniel has reached the age of thirty-three and has moved away from his role of journeyman, as in *There is a Tree*, to the role of witness to the fate of a family that has been largely orphaned either by death or because of miscegenation at the hands of the white Bloodworth clan. *Bloodworth Orphans* is divided into two large sections, Chapters 1–7 and Chapters 8–12, and it centers primarily around two events—the suicidal death of Abraham Dolphin and the death of Rachel Flowers, who succumbs to cancer. Their deaths serve as catalysts to the Bloodworth curse, triggering catastrophic doom among the entire Bloodworth clan. The novel concludes with a series of deaths reminiscent of a Shakespearean apocalypse, and as John G. Cawelti observes, “In this final movement, themes of classical and Christian mythology converge with African themes and Orphean sacrifices of Regal [Pettibone] and [Abraham] Dolphin seem to make way for the Christian hope of rebirth” (48).

In *Two Wings to Veil My Face* (1984), Forrest’s third novel, Nathaniel returns as Forest County’s central character. As in *There Is a Tree*, where Nathan and his aunt Sweetie Reed first appear, the main action in *Two Wings* has already taken place, but it is told through the process of (re)memory. Fourteen years prior to the story’s opening, Sweetie has promised to tell Nathan why she refused to go to her husband’s and Nathan’s grandfather’s funeral. Her explanation reveals the difficulties she has encountered as a woman who has had to come to terms with death and bounty. As Nathan has realized, her story is her father’s story, her husband’s story, Nathan’s story, and, in a more general sense, the African American story. His task is to process this information, discarding what is useless and maintaining possession of what is essential. After years of giving Nathan pieces of the story in no particular order, she finally tells him that it is time to move from “listening and half hearing to listening and recording in long hand.” Following Sweetie’s orders, Nathan begins to transcribe the griot’s tale. Forrest writes:

He [Nathan] looked over at the thick layers of writing paper. . . . Snatches of her [Sweetie] recall of I.V. Reed’s words coming back to him now, and Nathaniel Witherspoon thought, she’s cleaning up his language here and there, through the process of re-creation, memory transformed. Editing wherever possible . . . making it her own. How will it look when I transform it . . . he wondered. Or should I say, transpose it. (*Two Wings* 78)

This passage summarily renders Forrest's objectives as a writer—to render his versions of sermons, tales, and African American experiences passed to him through oral and written traditions, making them his own. Transposing, transforming, and re-creating, Forrest captures the importance of reviewing the past in the present moment and examining its effects on the future.

Forrest's latest novel, *Divine Days* (1992), returns to the liminal space between chaos and re-creation developed in the latter stage of *The Bloodworth Orphans*. Forrest introduces a new protagonist, Joubert Antoine Jones, and, like Nathan, he experiences an epiphany that reveals the redemptive power of African American cultural heritage and the necessity to re-create this force in his own life. Notably, the 1,135-page comic epic is Forrest's first presentation of a narrative in the first person. Narrated as Joubert's journal entries during the week of his return to Forest County from armed services duty in Germany, *Divine Days* develops around the conflict between the hipster Sugar-Grove and the trickster W.A.D. Ford and Joubert's relationship to them. However, the novel involves far more episodes and themes than this. As a whole, the novel richly explores a wide range of African American experiences, including spirituality, myth, culture, and music. Central to each of these themes is the quest for transcendence and the subsequent realization that each aspect can and must coexist.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In May 1993, *Callaloo* devoted a section of its spring issue to studies on Forrest and his works, which Cawelti edited and which includes his seminal essay on *Divine Days*. In 1997, Cawelti also edited *Leon Forrest: Introductions and Interpretations*, the first and only book-length study on Forrest's works.

As a whole, each of Forrest's novels has been well received by the few critics who have taken the initiative to comment critically on them. At best, Forrest's writing is difficult and obscure and is, thus, not very widely read. However, it is mainly for these same characteristics that critics admire his novels as works of art. Sven Birkerts, as quoted in Cawelti, writes: "*Divine Days* is that rare thing in our self-conscious and ironic age—a full-out serious work of art. . . . Here is a work that runs the octaves, carries us from street jive to the mysterious whisperings of the self in spiritual consultation" (262). Commenting on the role of history in Forrest's Witherspoon-Bloodworth trilogy, A. Robert Lee writes that the collective African American memories, "stretching from the earliest African diaspora through slavery-times and from abolition and the northward 'Great Migration' into the cities, declare themselves in abundance in Forrest's fiction. . . . History, as he [Forrest] seeks to render it, indeed operates as a storm against all the canons of order" (qtd. in Cawelti 101). Suggesting what sets Forrest apart from other novelists, Bruce Rosenberg writes: "Forrest's . . . inventiveness lies in his language usage, a usage which foregrounds the word. . . . he wants us to experience life with the realization that he is recreating what is actually impossible to duplicate" (qtd. in Cawelti 115). As these critics have discovered, Forrest's

novels, when read as attempts to reinvent the past to assess its effect on the present and the future, reveal themselves as meaningful and fulfilling readings.

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